

Overcoming Barriers to Success

Great Schools in Wake Forum

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I am delighted to be here and am grateful to speak at this Forum about the most fundamental long-term issue facing our nation: providing genuine equal educational opportunity for all our children.

I came to Raleigh as a skeptic. I didn't believe all the wonderful things I was hearing from my grandsons, who were then attending Washington Elementary magnet school. After visiting Washington and a few other schools I decided to put aside some other research and to arrange my schedule so I could spend one semester a year for three years as a Visiting Professor at NC State. And I want to take this opportunity to thank NC State colleagues for your generous hospitality and thoughtful guidance at every stage of my research.

I dug into the history of Raleigh that led up to the remarkable merger of city and county schools in 1976. It didn't happen

overnight. It took persistence, courage and political will, a story I tell in Hope and Despair in the American City. And in the face of new challenges today Wake County needs to redouble its efforts and strengthen its political will.

Over three years I visited a score of schools, returning often to some of them, sat in many classes at all levels of the system, interviewed dozens of teachers whose classes I had observed, and had full access to the data gathered by the system, as well as many interviews with principals and administrators.

I also did some research in preparation for this talk. My assignment is “Overcoming Barriers to Success in Urban Schools.” I began by downloading 23 pages of commentaries recently published in the Raleigh News and Observer’s forum on “Community Schools vs. Busing for Socioeconomic Diversity.” I cannot understand why the N&O did no exit polls on the day a new School Board was elected. A bloggers forum is not a fair sample of opinion but it does give us insight into what motivated those who elected the new Board. Blogging is a new form of talking over the fence to your

neighbors and its salty language can have a powerful effect on grass root beliefs.

The first barrier to progress is false beliefs and these blogs are filled with such beliefs. I do not say they are lies as most of these beliefs are sincerely held.

Some are simply false projections: For example, telling a story of a third grader who spends an hour on a bus as though that describes the typical bus ride in Wake County where 91 percent of elementary school children are bused less than five miles, and where busing costs are below average for NC school districts.

Others imply that most busing is busing to carry out the mandates of social engineers. As one blogger put it:

“Blending poor children in with children who CAN READ does nothing to make the illiterate children able to read. Nothing.”

Such beliefs are wrong on two counts. Less than 5 percent of Wake’s students are bused solely for economic balance. In the past 10 years, Wake grew by more than 45,000 pupils and built 48 schools to accommodate them. That growth accounted for the vast

majority of reassignments. Secondly, social research strongly supports the benefits to both poor and middle class children of blending or balancing schools rather than letting a two class system of schools emerge as it has done in my hometown of Syracuse and in most of urban America.

Another theme in these blogs is the idea that busing is unfair to poor parents who have little access to schools miles away from their homes and thus cannot be as effective advocates for their children. These writers may underestimate the percentage of the poor in America who are able to attend meetings at their children's schools. However, some do need transportation and it should be provided.

Much was made of the Black Power movement's rejection of integrated schools some years ago but even at the height of that movement only a minority of blacks opposed busing. They saw the benefits at the end of the bus ride. And part of the genius of Raleigh's plan was that it incorporated two-way busing from the beginning. Middle class whites attend Washington, Bugg and Ligon

schools in the inner city. Poor Latino and black students attend Briarcliff and Durant and Daniels in the suburbs.

A recent poll of 40,000 Wake parents—taken after the School Board election—showed that 94 percent are happy about their choice of school.

A study of black children who were bused to Boston's suburban schools in the 1960s and 70s found that as adults 85 percent of them would do it again. Some of them have since moved to the suburbs. Many who remained in Boston have enrolled their children in the Metco program that provides busing to suburban schools. There's a waiting list of those who want to participate in the voluntary program.

What comes closest to a lie among the bloggers is the accusation that “our education experts have dispersed lower income students under the guise of diversity so they can hide the school system's failure to educate these kids.” Wake County early on established one of the most transparent web sites in the nation and data on the success and failure rates of low income children was regularly published. My own book noted that both the failure rates

and the percentage of low income children in Wake had increased significantly by 2008.

Unfortunately, these bloggers did a lot of chatting over the electronic fence and seem to have won the media war in the short run. Although the vote total was a small slice of the electorate, they got those who shared their beliefs to the polls last October.

II

What should you do?

You must tell your story in new ways to broader audiences. It is an extraordinary story of fulfilling the promise of equal educational opportunity for every child. Raleigh tore down the invisible wall that separates city and suburb in much of urban America. And the results have been astonishing.

Raleigh did so many things right.

You had two-way busing.

You offered parents a rich array of choices among schools. We heard this morning about the amazing successes of magnet schools as engines of innovation and creativity.

You did not dumb down the curriculum. Numbers of students taking AP courses and the International Baccalaureate program went up. SAT scores rose. And recent data show dropout rates fell.

Although the number of schools that were out of balance rose in recent years—we'll say more about that in a moment—teachers and principals believed that there were no bad schools in Wake County. Principals were not jockeying to get into the schools reserved for the privileged. Teachers felt there was a level playing field in Wake County. No matter where they were sent to teach they would find a healthy mix of rich and poor. The odds in the classroom were in favor of success; they had a good chance of winning.

In school after school that I visited, interviews with teachers were often interrupted by their children, who waved as they went by or stopped to ask what time they would be going home that afternoon. That's not true in Syracuse or in most cities in America where teachers in high poverty urban school systems do not want their children going to the schools where they teach. They may

teach in the city but they live in the suburbs and their children go to suburban schools.

These realities need to be part of the story you tell. This conference is a good start. But you need to do more through new channels to broaden your base. Above all, do not let the Sarah Palins of the world label your efforts as elitist. Or as the province of experts or social engineers. Your movement is as old the ideal of the American common school. Your movement is about opportunity for the poor while creating diverse schools that also benefit middle and upper class children who will be more successful working in diverse settings and for multinational corporations in the 21st Century economy.

You must bring more poor parents into your ranks and urge them to tell their stories, too: Especially stories by those whose children attended high poverty schools before they moved to Raleigh. They can help others see that the benefits of balanced schools are worth the bus ride.

You need truth squads armed with the facts to counter the falsehoods spread by the bloggers and on talk radio. Put data on

the negative effects of resegregating the schools on billboards and in TV ads.

If necessary, bring truth to confront power in the courts.

Mobilize the alumni of Wake Schools. It has been more than thirty years since merger occurred. Seek and publicize the testimony of Wake graduates about how their education in diverse schools affected their lives and careers.

The coalition that brought about merger and helped lead Wake County schools to greatness is gone. You must build a new coalition of all those who have a stake in the success of Wake's schools and its diversity policies. Especially coalitions of leaders from Wake's new corporate and business communities, civil rights groups, ministries, civic groups, parent organizations and the Triangle research firms and institutions of higher education

Be creative about ways to document the broader effects of diverse schools on the quality of life in Raleigh—attracting new talent, growing the economy, increasing productivity, lowering crime rates, and creating new social networks. Balancing the schools also

had an effect on spreading residential integration while raising real estate values. Raleigh's inner core did not collapse as it has in many cities where white flight left thousands of boarded up homes in its wake. Two days ago the New York Times published a story that Detroit has closed more than 100 public schools and still has more than 50,000 empty seats in the schools that remain. They are proposing to close 45 more. Only three percent of Detroit's fourth graders were proficient in math in the last annual test of basic skills. Kansas City announced last week that it was closing 29 of its 61 schools for the same reason: too many seats.

How many empty seats are there in schools in downtown Raleigh?

III

Lastly, remember that confession is good for the soul.

In telling your story, admit mistakes, analyze failures, and then, most importantly, raise your sights.

First, three mistakes:

Well, let's admit it. The biggest mistake was the failure to build gates on all the roads leading to Wake County to keep the Yankees from invading Raleigh yet again.

Seriously, the reassignment caused by the huge influx to Raleigh became the biggest public relations problem Wake schools faced. Year after year it dominated news coverage and raised parental fears that their child might be uprooted. Wake should have moved much earlier to its new policy of making reassignments only once every three years. It would have greatly assuaged parent anxieties and resentments.

The Board should also have been more responsive to parent concerned about mandatory year-round schools, and to parent objections to early release of pupils on Wednesdays that was labeled as Wacky Wednesdays. Many bloggers raised those issues and the difficulties they posed for families trying to juggle work and school schedules and child care arrangements.

Second, the Board should have taken whatever steps necessary to fulfill its own balance policy. Too many schools were

allowed to get out of balance in recent years. Scores fell and achievement gaps widened.

Third, it was a mistake to try to do high school reform on the cheap. As former Superintendent Bill McNeal and former School Board member Tom Oxholm concluded in their recent book, the Board should have asked for major increases in funding when the 95 percent goal was extended to high schools, which are often more resistant to reform than elementary schools. High schools have not had as much success in closing the achievement gap as did the K-8 schools in the first stage of the 95 percent goal.

Wake County should not be proud to be near the bottom in per pupil funding in NC— ranking 84th of 115 NC school districts— and to have the lowest per pupil expenditure of any large school district in the nation.

Ironically, it has been able to do this partly because of its balance policies. Most large urban districts in the United States, unlike Wake, have many failing schools with high concentrations of children in poverty. Pouring more money into them has not resulted in overcoming the tangle of problems that plague such schools. The

most qualified teachers won't stay in those schools. And in more than a few of them, the gangs run the schools, not the teachers.

If its schools stay balanced, Wake won't need to spend as much money on its schools as those urban districts do: Syracuse spends more than \$16,000 per pupil and Washington DC \$22,000 per pupil compared to \$7800 per pupil in Wake. It has taken heroic efforts to achieve what Wake has achieved on such a skin and bones budget.

Wake needs significant increases in funds to realize its laudable goals: funds to attract and retain talented teachers, to expand and improve pre-K programs, to provide more tutoring and extended day programs for failing pupils, and to build more first class schools that rely less on trailers, to name just a few things that cry out for remedy.

Wake Needs both balanced schools and the funds to make them great.

Gerald Grant is the Hannah Hammond Professor of Education and Sociology Emeritus at Syracuse University and the author of *Hope and Despair in the American City: Why There Are No Bad Schools in Raleigh*.